

We face a clear choice in the greater Middle East: Either freedom will advance, or that region will continue to export violence to the world. The work of building democracies in nations that have endured decades of tyranny is hard. It's hard work. It will require the kind of sustained commitment that won the cold war. We accept that duty. We accept that duty in our time because our cause is right.

Even governments that did not join in the removal of Saddam's regime now understand that democracy in Iraq must succeed. And that work will succeed, because the appeal of freedom is universal. Freedom is not America's gift to the world. Freedom is the Almighty God's gift to every man and woman in this world.

The will of this country is strong. The will of our coalition is strong. And what we have begun, we will finish.

For all Americans, the last 3 years have brought tests we didn't ask for and for achievements shared by all. And by our actions, we have shown what kind of nation we are. We're a nation with a mission, and that mission comes from our most basic beliefs. We believe that freedom is the right of every single person in the world. By the unselfish dedication of Americans in uniform, people in our own country and in lands far away, people can live in freedom and know the peace that freedom brings.

America has been given great responsibilities, and they have come to the right country. We don't shirk from any challenge. We're rising to the call of history. Now and in the future, this great Republic will lead the cause of freedom and peace.

May God bless you all, and may God continue to bless our country. Thank you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:37 p.m. at Fort Polk Army Airfield. In his remarks, he referred to Brig. Gen. Jason K. Kamiya, USA, commanding general, Col. Arthur "Wade" Woolfrey, Jr., USA, deputy commander, and Command Sgt. Maj. Iuniasolua T. Savusa, USA, Joint Readiness Training Center and Fort Polk; Gen. Larry R. Ellis, USA, commanding general, and Command Sgt. Maj. Carl E. Christian, USA, U.S. Army Forces Command; country music entertainers Kevin Sharp and John Berry; former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; senior Al Qaida associate Abu

Musab Al Zarqawi; and USAID officer Laurence Foley, who was killed in Amman, Jordan, on October 28, 2002. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Letter to Congressional Leaders Reporting a Certification Required by the Ratification Resolution of the Chemical Weapons Convention February 17, 2004

Dear Mr. Speaker: (Dear Mr. Chairman:)

Consistent with the resolution of advice and consent to ratification of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction, adopted by the United States Senate on April 24, 1997, and based on the recommendation of the Department of Commerce, I certify that for calendar year 2003:

In connection with Condition 9, Protection of Advanced Biotechnology, the legitimate commercial activities and interests of chemical, biotechnology, and pharmaceutical firms in the United States were not harmed significantly by the limitations of the Convention on access to, and production of, those chemicals and toxins listed in Schedule 1 of the Annex on Chemicals.

Sincerely,

George W. Bush

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to J. Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Richard G. Lugar, chairman, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

Interview With Mouafac Harb of the Middle East Television Network January 29, 2004

President's Religious Perspective

Mr. Harb. Mr. President, thank you very much for supporting our channel and our initiative. We will make sure on our channel, your policy, the point of view of your administration, will always be presented clearly and in fair context. However, we will make

sure—we want to be a model for the free press, the American tradition—other point of views, relevant ones, will always be there, even if they are critical of you.

The President. Well, I understand that. I hope so. First of all, I appreciate your willingness to allow the people in the Middle East to hear my views. My views are one that speaks to freedom. I believe the Almighty God's gift to every person in the world is freedom, and I work for free societies because I believe in people.

I want people to know that I respect religion. I'm a religious man, myself. I respect the religion of other people as well. I believe we pray to the same Almighty God. I want people to know that I believe in peace. I want there to be peace. I also want people to know that it's very important for us to work together to fight terror, to fight those who would be willing to kill innocent lives in order to foster their own personal agendas.

I appreciate that. I also don't mind people expressing opinions other than mine. I expect that to happen. It happens here in America, and I expect it to happen around the world.

Freedom and Democracy in the Middle East

Mr. Harb. You may be the only world leader today, and maybe the first American President, to pay a lot of attention to freedom and democracy in the Middle East. Why is that? Are you so committed to that?

The President. I am very committed to freedom and democracy in the Middle East. I believe people can self-govern around the world. Now, there are some, admittedly, say, "Well, they can't have freedom and democracy in the Middle East." But I think that point of view is condescending. I think it diminishes the hopes and aspirations of the citizenry of the Middle East. I absolutely believe in freedom and peace, and I look forward to working with governments to achieve freedom and peace.

Now, I recognize not every government is going to fashion a free society in the vision of America. I don't expect that, but I do expect every government to uphold the aspirations of the average citizens in a free society.

National Endowment for Democracy

Mr. Harb. You mentioned in the State of the Union Address that you would be doubling the budget for the National Endowment of Democracy towards the Middle East. What's your vision? How are you trying to accomplish that?

The President. Well, I think we need to work with governments and institutions and NGOs to encourage the institutions of a free society. See, one of the interesting things in the Oval Office—I love to bring people into the Oval Office, right around the corner from here, and say, "This is where I office, but I want you to know the office is always bigger than the person." In other words, free societies are societies where people come and go, but the institutions that protect the rights of people never leave. And that's what the institute is going to be working on, free press, just like we just talked about, free elections, free society.

Evolution of Democracy

Mr. Harb. You said you would be working with governments in the Middle East.

The President. Sure.

Mr. Harb. And you know the type of governments that now exist in the Middle East, and for how long the U.S. has been accused of playing ball with governments that people hate. When you say you want this strategy, forward strategy of freedom, are you saying you're going to be abandoning the monarchies and, you know, those guys?

The President. No, of course not. I know them well. First of all, many of the countries in the Middle East are modernizing. And that's what I look for. I fully understand it takes time for free societies, truly free societies to evolve. I don't expect instant success. After all, in my own country it took a while for our current system to evolve.

Take Saudi Arabia, for example. First of all, I respect Crown Prince Abdullah and like Crown Prince Abdullah. He's a man of great faith and great integrity who gave a speech the other day about the need to modernize and to reform Saudi society. I take him for his word. To me that was a positive development.

King Abdullah of Jordan, the King of Morocco, I mean, there's a series of places—

Qatar, Oman—I mean, places that are developing—Bahrain—they’re all developing the habits of free societies. They evolve differently. But nevertheless, progress is being made. And for that, I’m very grateful.

Discussions With Middle Eastern Leaders

Mr. Harb. When you sit down with the leaders of the countries you just mentioned, Mr. President, do you get a sense of the urgency, when we talk about the issues of reform and democracy, from them?

The President. Well, I get a sense of two things from them. One, I do believe they understand the need to reform. But I also know they agree that we need to continue to work together to fight terror. And that’s vital, because it’s hard for a free society to develop with terrorists killing innocent people.

For example, I have a vision in the Middle East for there to be a Palestinian state. I’m the first President to have ever articulated a Palestinian state. I believe there needs to be a Palestinian state, and I’m not going to change my opinion. On the other hand, I know how hard it is to achieve a Palestinian state so long as there’s groups of terrorists willing to murder in order to prevent that from happening.

And so I hear two things. I hear, one, the need to reform, to include more people in the process which is taking place, but also the clear understanding from leaders that we must continue to work together to fight off the terrorists. And I say this with conviction. There’s a—the murderous ambitions of a few are trying to derail the hopes of many. And my Government wants to work with governments to prevent that from happening.

Roadmap for Peace/Reform of the Palestinian Authority

Mr. Harb. Has the roadmap failed? Do we need a new approach to revive the peace talks and work towards your vision?

The President. No, not at all, no. The roadmap is in place. What has failed is the—some parties are not advancing on the roadmap. They’re stuck. And I stood up with Mr. Abu Mazen, at that time the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, with Prime Minister Sharon, in Aqaba, Jordan—and King Abdullah, of course, our host—and we linked

arms and said, “Let us move forward on the roadmap to peace.” There needs to be a commitment to fight terror. There needs to be a commitment to put the institutions of a free society in place. There needs to be a commitment on the Israelis to worry about the plight of the average Palestinian citizen—to encourage a society to evolve that is commercially viable and free. There needs to be a commitment from the neighborhood to help fight off the flow of funds to fund the terrorist groups, that would stop.

And we were making progress. We really were, and then he got shoved aside. And so the roadmap is still intact. The vision for where we need to go is intact. What we need right now are parties who are willing to take a risk for peace and to lead. And I look forward to working with any such party.

Mr. Harb. Why then are some people in the U.S. or some of your friends and allies in the Middle East say that you’re not personally doing enough? How would you respond to that?

The President. Well, I would remind them of the pictures of Aqaba, Jordan. I mean, it’s—it is a rare occurrence when the President stands up with Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and says, “We’re linked together to move toward peace.” The problem was, was that somebody undermined that peace process by making it very difficult for Prime Minister Abu Mazen to work to achieve his vision. And that somebody was Chairman Arafat. I’m sorry that happened. On the other hand, I still believe that a Palestinian state is essential for the aspirations of the Palestinian people. And I fully understand there needs to be a firm commitment to fight off terror in order for that to happen.

Transition in Iraq

Mr. Harb. On the issue of Iraq, how do you see the transition of sovereignty to the Iraqis?

The President. Moving. I mean, if you really take a step back, we’re here in February of 2004, and the Iraqi people weren’t really liberated until April of 2003. We haven’t been there a year. And yet, there’s tremendous progress being made. The first thing I pay attention to—there are voices

speaking out about how to achieve democracy. Had those voices spoken out last year or the year before or the year before, they probably wouldn't be a voice anymore, given the fact that Saddam Hussein was willing to torture and kill dissidents.

And today, a free society is emerging. And it may look bumpy at times, but democracy sometimes looks bumpy. I mean, here in our own country I'm sure people take a step back and say, "What is happening in the election process?" I mean, it looks like there are some sharp elbows. But I am encouraged by what is taking place in Iraq. I appreciate so very much the fact that the Shi'as speak out for freedom. I appreciate the fact that the Sunnis are questioning whether or not they have a role in the future of their country. I appreciate the fact that the Kurds are active. I appreciate the fact that all three parties are trying to work for a common law that guarantees the religious rights of others, the minority rights of people in a free society.

So I think it's very positive. We look forward to working with the United Nations to help the process along, to add some international legitimacy to what the Iraqis think is necessary to move the process toward a new constitution and elections of people.

Ayatollah Sistani

Mr. Harb. From the outside, it looked like the Grand Ayatollah in Iraq, he's a religious man, he's calling for immediate elections, and we're kind of hesitant to do it right now. What's your reaction to that?

The President. Well, that's very interesting. No, I understand completely. First of all, I admire the fact that he is confident enough in democracy to call for elections. I mean, after all, America believes in elections. I think the only hesitancy from the experts is whether or not the process is ready to absorb direct elections. And we want to work with Mr. Sistani, the Ayatollah. He's a wise man. He's a distinguished gentleman who cares deeply about the Iraqi people. And I'm confident we can work toward a solution that is in Iraq's interest and, at the same time, addresses his deep desire to have the people of Iraq participate in the process.

I think the fact that he's willing to be involved is a very positive development. It

shows people care about the future of Iraq. We just must all work together to come up with an Iraqi solution as to how best to get a constitution written and then direct elections. The first step, of course, is a general law and then a temporary assembly of some kind to help—so we can hand over sovereignty. And then the process moves forward.

Syria

Mr. Harb. If we can move towards Syria.
The President. Sure.

Mr. Harb. You had a couple of phone calls with the Syrian President after September 11, and things looked, you know, that the President of Syria was going in the right direction, according to your administration. And then things went sour. What happened?

The President. Well, first of all, I think we made some legitimate requests. I said, "Look, Hezbollah is a terrorist organization. They headquartered in your country. You need to shut down those headquarters. You need to prevent terrorist activities from being planned and/or orders being—emanating out of Syria. Secondly, you've got to work on the border to make sure that the border between Iraq and Syria is not porous, but in fact, you are able to stop the flow of people and contraband and information back and forth. We don't want terrorists coming in from Syria into Iraq to kill innocent Iraqis and/or American troops." And it's very important for us to keep sending that message to him. That's why I appreciate doing this interview. The message still stands. And we would hope there would be a strong cooperation on these very reasonable points.

Mr. Harb. The Syrian President sent a couple of signals recently expressing his willingness to resume peace talks with Israel. Would you be willing—how do you assess this—

The President. It's very interesting. First of all, I'm interested in peace. And the fact that a party is willing to talk about peace is, I think, a positive signal. I look forward to understanding fully what that means. As you know, there was—some progress had been made prior to my arrival as President on Syrian-Israeli peace talks. And we've just got to understand the intent, the sincerity, and the

desire of both parties involved, that would be Syria and Israel.

Libya

Mr. Harb. Libya.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Harb. Although some people, maybe in Washington, and you may consider what happened with Libya as a success for diplomacy, but it did not sit well with the Libyans. It looks like it contradicts this forward strategy of freedom.

The President. How do you mean it didn't sit well with them? It sat well with Colonel Qadhafi because he made the decision.

Mr. Harb. But in terms of democracy, I mean, you know, Qadhafi is a dictator—

The President. Oh, whether or not democracy then follows—I see. Well, we hope it does, of course, and we look forward to working with him. But first things first. We had no relationship with Libya, and now the relationship can improve because he has made a very wise decision to disclose programs and dismantle those programs. To me, it's a signal that Colonel Qadhafi is interested in a peaceful—is interested in peace and a resumption of relations with a country like the United States, and that will begin to change the relationship.

Right now we want to make sure that we all fulfill our obligations. And a key obligation is for the United States and Great Britain and the IAEA to work with the Libyans to fully disclose and dismantle, in a transparent way, weapons programs.

Mr. Harb. Would it be safe to say that the United States would not fully normalize with Libya unless the human rights record of the Libyan Government were to improve—

The President. Well, obviously, there's a lot of conditionality in any relationship. We do want to improve relationships with Libya, but the first thing—the first step, of course, is for the Colonel to fulfill his commitment to the entire world, and that is to disclose and dismantle. And then the relationship will evolve.

Iran and Weapons of Mass Destruction

Mr. Harb. On the issue of weapons of mass destruction—Iran.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Harb. Libya is a case where diplomacy worked. Iraq is a place where—

The President. Diplomacy didn't work.

Mr. Harb. —didn't work.

The President. Well, it didn't work. It was tried for 12 years, and it didn't work. And the world continually said, "Disarm," and he didn't do it. And finally, I went to the United Nations and said to the United Nations, "For your sake and for our sake—you, the United Nations' sake—for our sake, America, and for the world's sake, let us enforce these resolutions."

Mr. Harb. So we've got the Libyan model, and we've got the Iraqi model.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Harb. Which one would fit Iran today?

The President. All models must start with a strong effort by the world community to convince people to abandon—in this case, abandon programs, nuclear weapons programs. And we certainly hope the Iranian situation can be resolved diplomatically. I appreciate very much the fact that members of the European Community have spoken with one voice about the need for Iran* to fully disclose and disarm its weapons programs, and IAEA is very much involved.

So, in other words, we're now early in the stage, obviously, and it's a stage where I'm hopeful that diplomacy will work.

Iraq

Mr. Harb. You mentioned the international community. Are you satisfied with the way the international community is reacting towards the rebuilding of Iraq?

The President. Yes, I really am. I mean, gosh, there's a lot of countries that are very much involved in Iraq. The other night in the State of the Union, I began to read off the list. And the longer the list got, the more the American people begin to realize this is a truly internationalized effort. And people are contributing money. I mean, I was talking about forces on the ground, and the level of contributions are very generous, starting with the United States, I might add. And I'm most proud of the Congress for being willing

* White House correction.

to help rebuild Iraq, because they understand, like I understand, that a free Iraq is going to be an agent of change in a positive way in the Middle East.

Again, I want to go back to where we began. See, if you didn't believe certain countries in the Middle East could be free, then you wouldn't be worried about rebuilding of a country. But I believe they can be free, and I know free societies are peaceful societies. And I believe in the Iraqi people of all walks of life, and I believe that they're going to show the world what is possible.

After all, the Iraqi people have such a—Iraqi history is so rich. The culture of Iraq is fantastic. And it's—I have visions of a university system that really leads the Middle East in education and on the forefront of science and engineering, because I know the Iraqi Americans who are here, very bright, capable, honorable people who have come to our country, realized the benefits of freedom, taken advantage of some fantastic opportunities, and made great citizens.

Well, the same thing is going to happen in Iraq. And that will cause others to say, "Well, gosh, if it's happening in Iraq, let's follow that model of a free society." And the American Congress understands that. I understand that, and a lot of people around the world understand it. And I am grateful for the contributions that people are willing to make for the reconstruction of Iraq.

Mr. Harb. Are you concerned that Iraq's neighbors may work to undermine the democracy because it doesn't suit the region?

The President. Well, it's an interesting question. I certainly hope not. But if—look, one of the neighbors to Iraq is Turkey. And they withstood any pressure, if there was any pressure, to undermine the development of a free and secular society. They still maintain its respect for Islam.

Pakistan is another country which is evolving, showing what is possible in terms of a free society and an active Parliament and, at the same time, honoring Islam.

No, I think a truly free society will resist foreign efforts to undermine the development of that society.

2004 Election/Future of the Middle East

Mr. Harb. Mr. President, this is an election year for you.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Harb. If, hypothetically, people in the Middle East could vote, would the next 4 years be—if you were to be elected—would be good for them?

The President. Oh, absolutely.

Mr. Harb. Why would they vote for you?

The President. Absolutely. Well, they'd vote for me because I am strong on the war on terror, for starters. I refuse to relent to terrorist groups. There's no negotiation with these people. These are people that are willing to kill people who are devout, religious people, and not care about it. They kill innocent women and children and not care about it. More Muslims have died at the hands of killers than—I say more Muslims—a lot of Muslims have died—I don't know the exact count—at Istanbul. Look at these different places around the world where there's been tremendous death and destruction because killers kill.

They would appreciate George W. in the future because I understand that freedom and prosperity go hand in hand. And a free society is more likely to be a prosperous society where people can realize their hopes and aspirations.

Listen, I'm a dad. I love my girls more than anything in life, our daughters. I know that other dads feel the same way about their children, and all they want is for their children to have a chance to succeed, to grow up in a peaceful society, to be well-educated and to realize their God-given potential. I share that dream.

I think the people of the Middle East will see that the Bush administration is unrelenting when it comes to dealing with the few who want to hurt the many but, at the same time, believes in the people of the Middle East, believes in their hopes and aspirations.

Mr. Harb. Thank you very much, Mr. President.

The President. Yes, sir.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 10:02 a.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast, and the transcript was released by the

Office of the Press Secretary on February 18. In his remarks, the President referred to Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia; King Abdullah II of Jordan; King Mohamed VI of Morocco; former Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) of the Palestinian Authority; Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel; Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraqi Shiite leader; President Bashar al-Asad of Syria; and Col. Muammar Abu Minyar al-Qadhafi, leader of Libya. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Letter to Congressional Leaders Transmitting a Report on Iraq

February 17, 2004

Dear Mr. Speaker: (Dear Mr. President:)

Consistent with the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002 (Public Law 107-243), the Authorization for the Use of Force Against Iraq Resolution (Public Law 102-1), and in order to keep the Congress fully informed, I am providing a report prepared by my Administration. This report includes matters relating to post-liberation Iraq under section 7 of the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 (Public Law 105-338).

Sincerely,

George W. Bush

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to J. Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Richard B. Cheney, President of the Senate. This letter was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on February 18. An original was not available for verification of the content of this letter.

Remarks Prior to Discussions With President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and an Exchange With Reporters

February 18, 2004

President Bush. A couple statements, and I'm going to answer a couple of questions afterwards.

Mr. President, welcome. I'm glad you're here in the Oval Office. Thank you for your

friendship. I'm looking forward to a good discussion.

I want to thank you for working with the United States in the war on terror. I want to thank you for your understanding for the need for Iraq to be democratic and free. I appreciate the fact that you've got an education system that is modern and viable, that women in your country are given equal rights. I look forward to talking to you about the need to have a press corps that is vibrant and free as well as an open political process. There's a lot we can talk about. Tunisia can help lead the greater Middle East to reform and freedom, something that I know is necessary for peace for the long term.

So welcome.

President Ben Ali. Mr. President, thank you for very much for this opportunity. I am delighted to be here in the United States, and thank you very much for your generous invitation.

As you know, the Tunisian-U.S. relationships have been always unique and ancient. They go back for two centuries. Mr. President, we also look forward to increasing and cementing those relationships between the two countries in all spheres and every area, in order to continue to support the friendship between the two peoples and between the two countries.

We share principles together, Mr. President, and that is the establishment of states on the basis of democracy, human rights, and combating terror. We believe that Tunisia is an ally of the United States and the relationships between the two countries has strategic dimension.

And I would like to take this opportunity to thank the friendly American people who stood by us during our liberation and after our independence. Thank you very much.

President Bush. A couple of questions. Scott [Scott Lindlaw, Associated Press].

Same-Sex Marriage

Q. Thanks, Mr. President. More than 3,000 same-sex couples have taken vows since San Francisco started issuing marriage licenses to gays and lesbians. This Massachusetts court ruling could result in the first legally recognized gay marriages in May. Do